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ABSTRACT

Developed to provide an outdoor learning environment for a small school which had relatively undeveloped grounds, these plans are aimed toward providing: physical activity (climbing, running, jumping, and games); imaginative activity; social learning; environmental study; mathematics and science; exploring materials, e.g., water and soil; and the extension of classroom activities outside. The plans incorporate activity areas such as an adventure hill-amphitheatre, a log fort, a horizontal ladder, crossed climbing logs arranged in diminishing squares, vertical climbing logs of various sizes, and a balancing log set. Additionally, a fish pond and native trees replaced a flower garden, large stepping stones were used for a path, lines were painted on the asphalt tarmac to accommodate mathematics activities and games such as hop-scotch (trestles and benches were built and stored under the school for easy movement onto this area for art activities), and under both tanks fern houses were established. The last section provides suggestions for involving the rural community in the project. (AH)

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PLANNING AN OUTDOOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR A SMALL SCHOOL

C. Keats, D. McWhirter, N. Parmenter,
J. Veacock and M. Fogarty

INTRODUCTION

Dean (1975, 3) stated that children learn from everything they experience and that a great deal of learning that takes place outside the school building may support learning in the classroom. He added that this is an easier process if the outside environment is planned towards this end and that the following areas may be catered for in this way:

physical activity - climbing, running, jumping as well as games;

imaginative activity;

social learning;

environmental study;

mathematics and science;

exploring materials, e.g. water and soil; and

the extension of classroom activities outside.

With this in mind, the authors decided to take a particular small school whose grounds were relatively undeveloped and design a plan that would promote effective outdoor learning and activities.

AS IT WAS

Figure One is a plan (not to scale) of the school grounds in their initial state. The school was a high-set, two-teacher school with an asphalt tarmac adjacent to the concreted area beneath. Two tanks, both set high off the ground, were located close to the building, and two toilets were positioned on opposite sides of the playground. In the front, a concrete path with flower gardens on either side stretched from the gate to the school building. Playground equipment included a swing, slide and log-swing. In the play area were a tennis court, a cricket pitch and a vegetable garden. The total area occupied 2.1 hectares.

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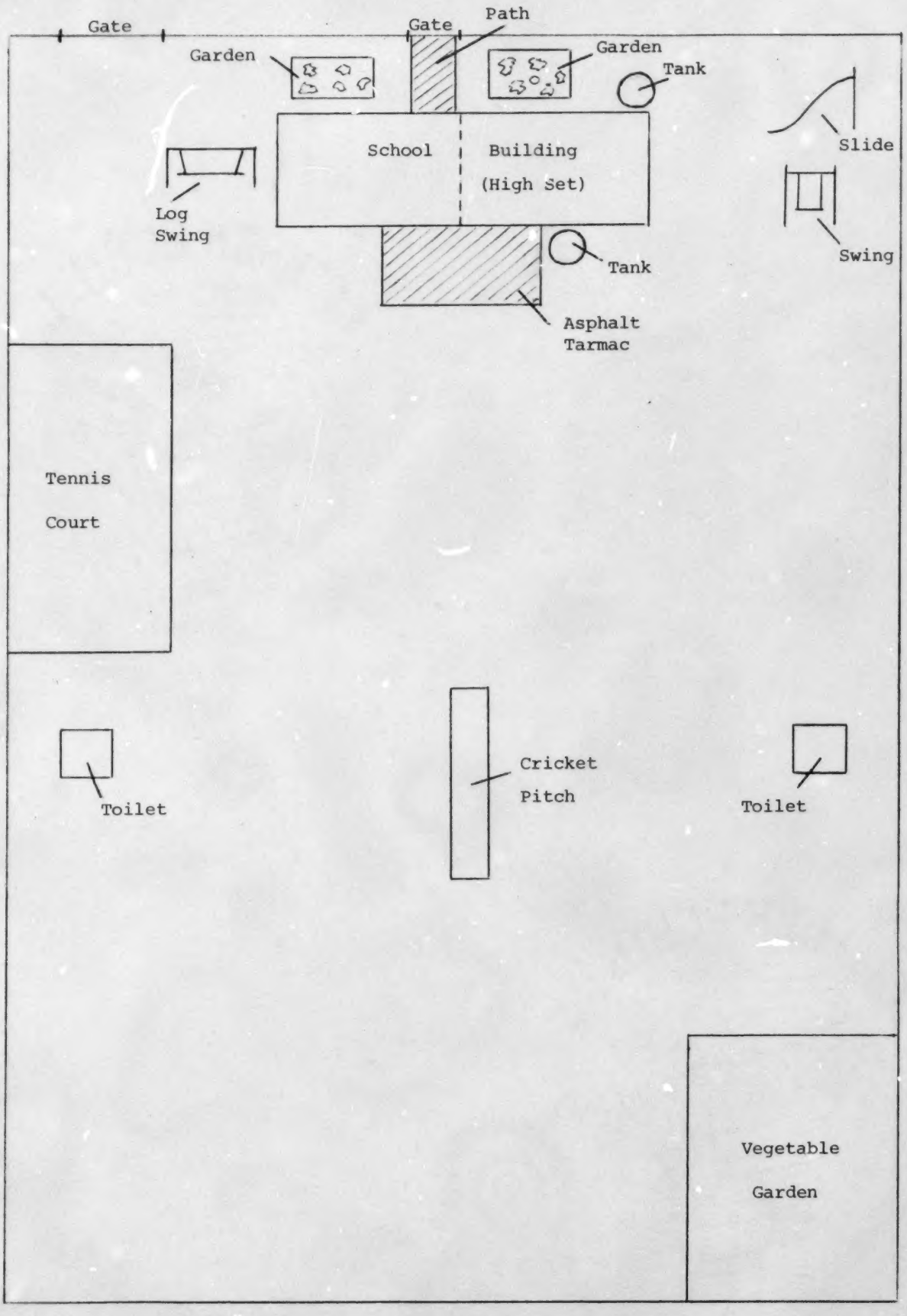
FIGURE ONE



NOT TO SCALE

THE PLAN

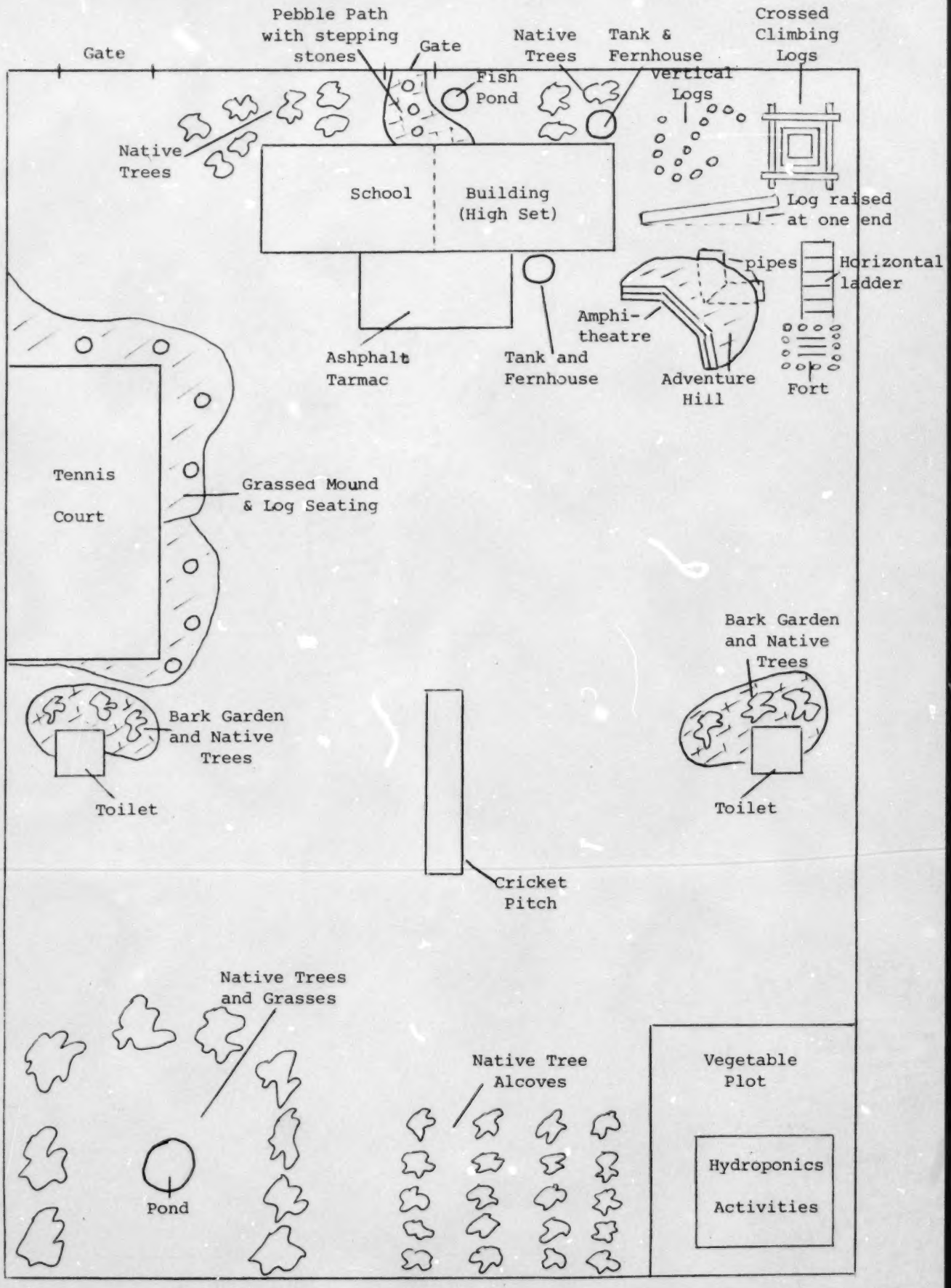
Figure Two shows the plan (not to scale) to develop an outdoor learning environment. The slide and swing in the top right-hand corner have been replaced by an adventure playground and combination adventure hill-amphitheatre. The adventure playground was designed to develop the children's climbing, balancing and motor co-ordination skills. The fort consisted of posts set vertically in the ground and a 2 metre high platform surrounded by a 1.2 metre wall. A horizontal ladder extended to this platform under which a sand-pit was ideally located. Besides the fort, logs were also used to construct: crossed climbing logs arranged in diminishing squares; vertical climbing logs of various sizes; and a balancing log set on the ground at one end and raised 1.5 metres above it at the other.

The adventure hill had two large concrete pipes, 1.2 metres in diameter, set at right angles under one side, and an amphitheatre on the other. The latter consisted of tiered logs arranged in different directions and faced towards the cricket pitch. It was designed for a variety of uses, but was particularly suited to drama activities. The tiered logs were also seen as a vantage point from which to watch sporting activities, e.g. inter-school cricket, as well as providing an area for classroom extension activities and use during lunch periods.

The flower gardens in the front were replaced by a fish pond and native trees. The log-swing was removed and the concrete path was replaced by a pebble path that incorporated large irregular-shaped stepping stones. On the asphalt tarmac, lines were painted to accommodate mathematics activities and games such as hop-scotch. Trestles and benches were built and stored under the school for easy movement onto this area for art activities. Under both tanks, fern houses were established.

The tennis court surrounds were made more attractive with the addition of grassed mounds containing log-seating. These were intended to be used to view inter-school and week-end tennis matches as well as during lunch periods.

FIGURE TWO



NOT TO SCALE

The areas around both toilets were improved by building bark gardens and planting native trees.

The lower left-hand corner, previously a bare area, was converted to a natural environment by the planting of native trees and grasses. Honey floras quickly develop to support an abundant and varied animal life. It was felt that the best setting for the plot was a U-shape with a central area occupied by a pond. The latter quickly becomes an environment in its own right. A bird-feeding station was also added.

The vegetable garden was retained, in part, in its original capacity. A small hydroponics laboratory was added to this area. Hydroponics, the science of cultivating plants in a soil substitute with the aid of a nutrient solution, can be employed simultaneously with basic agricultural techniques. Adjacent to this location, four rows of native trees were planted to provide alcoves to be used as work areas.

HUMAN AND ECONOMIC RESOURCES

In establishing an effective outdoor learning environment, small rural schools, in general, have an advantage over their larger urban counterparts. The man-on-the-land quite often owns heavy machinery such as bull-dozers and tractors with scoops, the equipment necessary for earth-moving activities such as building an adventure hill.

Chain-saws are also quite common and this coupled with the well-known "bush-carpentry" skills of farm and property owners, forms a very useful combination in the provision of log structures. Earth-moving and the purchase of logs are expensive items in the towns and cities, but often in the country, with the good will of parents and interested citizens, these may be carried out at little or no cost. As a rule, country people are not "tied" to nine to five occupations as the majority of city dwellers are and, in general, are generous with their time in helping a worthy cause.

Perhaps many native trees may be found in country localities, but in

any case, the Department of Forestry is always willing to assist in this regard. The setting up of a hydroponics laboratory requires a little time, effort and finance, but experience has shown thus far that schools that have moved into this area have received a great deal of community interest and support.

CONCLUSION

The major requirements of the small country school in improving its outdoor learning environment appear to be more dependent upon voluntary human resources than economic ones. The plan that was drawn up showed the versatility of such areas. It had provision for:

physical activity - climbing, running, jumping as well as games;

imaginative activity;

social learning;

environmental study;

mathematics and science;

exploring materials, e.g. water and soil; and

the extension of classroom activities outside.

In fact, all curriculum areas that include the child's social, physical, academic and creative development are catered for.

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